



COMMUNITY
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Minister
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23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 4, 2005

Matthew 6: 25-34

In Times Like These

Intro: Our NT lesson is from the 6th chapter of Matthew, which is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Through the teachings that make up this sermon, Jesus speaks to people who have heard about the gospel of grace, they believe in God's love, but they are not sure how to live their lives, especially in times of trouble. Let us listen for God's word of comfort.

Last Sunday we gathered and worshiped with a festive spirit. We shared laughter, loud music; there was this irrepressible and wonderful feeling in the air that a new season had begun. And it has. This Sunday, with clear skies, school has started, our fall routines are underway and yet we as a nation it seems we gather with a sense of uneasiness and bewilderment about the days to come. To use a local concern, Dorothy's ruby red slippers are gone and we're not sure how to get home to the way things were. With the arrival of hurricane Katrina, people are talking about the devastation there, the loss of life, the implications of this disaster. As a nation, it seems that so much changed within a week.

As we turn on the news or read the papers, we hear of the tragic loss of life in numbers uncounted, we see people's desperation turn

to violence and chaos. We hear accusations of a slow response by the federal government. We see gas prices going up and warnings about fuel shortages this winter. We are confronted with unanswered questions what day-to-day life from this point. In the face of the unknown, we may be worried and anxious about the days ahead.

Much of this week had a strange familiarity to it. Newscasts dedicated to one topic. We've seen the effects of the Tsunami last Christmastime, now the raging waters are much closer to home. For a few days it felt like we were all sitting in the emergency waiting room - waiting for news and wondering what to say. How bad is it really, what happened and what can be done? How do we begin to understand what happened?

In times like these it is good to call on our faith and turn to scriptures. Throughout scripture we are counseled, "Do not be afraid." The angels call that out to the shepherds in the fields as they announce the arrival of a child who would rescue them. "Do not be afraid!" Jesus says as he faced death. Again and again he tells his followers, "Fear not, for I am with you until the end of the ages." The Bible is full of such stories. God must know we live in a world and with mindsets that are filled with fearful things. Yet in the face of those things, God and Jesus and Angels throughout the Scriptures proclaim. "Be not afraid!"

Now as rescue attempts give way to recovery, and the reality of the loss of life settles in,

We understand what our Psalmist says: that when things that seem most certain and permanent about life—when the mountains shake; and when those things that seem most perilous and dangerous in life, when the sea roars and foams, that it is then that God alone is our refuge and strength, our very present help in times of trouble. The earth has changed shape; a sea of grief roars in our nation, and this is a time when we reach to help each other, but it is God who will see us through to a new day.

Writing on this psalm Eugene Peterson says "If we think that looking to God fills us with undisturbed peace and unalloyed joy so that there is simply no space left in our lives for an awareness of barbarity, we are wrong. Nature is violent, governments are violent. People are violent. Reading the Psalms is a shocking experience. Praying is a courageous act." The Psalmist concludes

the Psalm, be still (leave off) and know that I am God! I'm exalted among the nations; I'm exalted in the earth, the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge. God is our source and center in these difficult days.

In our NT reading this morning, Jesus is saying remember God is the center, don't be anxious, don't worry about what will come. Even when events seem overwhelming. His story gives us hope. As we look for the transcendent in our lives we know that we are not alone and that God is with us in our times of pain and powerlessness. Take comfort; know that pain will be met by Grace. We will always have both in this life. With Christ there is movement from dark to light, from despair to confidence. Daily needs will be met. Knowing that, we move forward one day at a time.

Prolonged anxiety, worry and fear are enemies of the soul. It is from fear that there comes the worst of our human responses, violence, arrogance, and insensitivity to others all spring from prolonged anxiety. The voice of God calls us time and again in Scripture away from fear and into hope. "Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me," the Psalmist writes.

Throughout Scripture we are reminded that God's people were never exempt from Suffering. The Prophet Jeremiah lived in a time as fearful as any. Israel was overrun by Foreign invaders, the brutal Assyrians. The land was laid waste, the city of Jerusalem would surely fall. The people were in panic. In the midst of this scene, Jeremiah

proclaimed God's word in a startling way. He went out to buy a field, in the territory being overrun and burned and laid waste by foreign armies saying, "Houses and Vineyards and Fields will again be in this land. Proclaiming God's promise that on the other side of despair and destruction is hope.

Hope is our calling. Life and hope is what God calls forth from us. And I believe that all of the repeated calls of Scripture, begging us not to give in to fear, are Gods recognition that we need help to live and to hope in this world. So God sends such help with his promise that God is with us, even in the valley of the shadow of death. God sends Jesus, and messengers and angels to whisper, and say and yell, in our ears. Be not afraid.

There is much that may concern us, but let us not be anxious or worry about what is to come. In times like these, we may wonder what to do next, and we ask ourselves what to do? In times like these, we can come to the table and be strengthened by God's grace, knowing that God provides. In times like these, we can baptize children and hear again the promises that we are all loved as children of God, and the news is Good. In times like these we speak words and express care to each other. At all times, but especially these days, let us listen carefully to each other, knowing that these are difficult days. Let us seek to express our fears upward toward God, not toward neighbors on the planet. Let us be people of hope - seeking God's peace and relying on God's presence.

AMEN.